DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 415 356 CE 075 510

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TITLE The Effects of Social Support and Self-Esteem on Career Indecision: A Cross-Cultural Comparison between Two Groups of Undergraduate Students.
PUB DATE 1996-04-11
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, April 11, 1996). For a related document, see CE 075 509.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Career Choice; Career Education; College Students; Comparative Analysis; *Cross Cultural Studies; Cultural Differences; *Cultural Influences; Decision Making; Educational Research; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Self Esteem; *Social Support Groups; *Undergraduate Students; Undergraduate Study
IDENTIFIERS Universidad del Pacifico (Peru); University of Pittsburgh PA

ABSTRACT

A study between college students from two different cultural and social backgrounds who were undecided about careers assessed levels of indecision, social support, and self-esteem. The context for the study was career indecision research showing that cultural values and specific characteristics of Hispanics and Latinos were deeply rooted in their social and cultural traditions. A demographic questionnaire, Career Decision Scale (CDS), Self-Esteem Inventory--Adult Form (SEI), and the Social Support Scale (SSS) gathered information from 140 undergraduate students at counseling centers at the University of Pittsburgh (n=69) and the Universidad del Pacifico, Peru (n=71). Statistical analyses included Pearson-Product Moment Coefficients, multiple regression analyses, and t-tests. Findings indicated a positive correlation between the variables of social support and self-esteem, amd career indecision for both groups. Analyses of the variables of social support and self-esteem as predictors of career indecision found no significance for Pittsburgh participants; for Peru participants, 29 percent of the indecision variance could be attributed to social support and self-esteem. The groups were similar when comparing social support and self-esteem, but the Pittsburgh sample showed more career indecision. Lack of career choices available in the Peruvian educational system and cultural characteristics for selecting specific professional degrees may be related to the career decision making of Peru students. (37 references) (YLB)

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ED 415 356

THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL SUPPORT AND SELF-ESTEEM ON CAREER INDECISION: A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON BETWEEN TWO GROUPS OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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1996

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the AERA

New York, NY

April 11, 1996

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to investigate how social support and self-esteem may influence college students in the process of career decision. A comparison between college students undecided about career, from two different cultural and social backgrounds assessed the perception of the levels of indecision, social support and self-esteem. This research was exploratory in terms of search for new relationships among the three variables and for establishing, if any, differences and similarities among the groups according to personal, cultural, educational, and social influences. Results provided new strategies for better understanding students of different cultural backgrounds who seek career assistance in a counseling center.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Helping college students to select a career may be a difficult task for career counselors because a wide range of students do not respond to the traditional, information-oriented career interventions. Different strategies and theoretical approaches in the areas of development, family systems, and personality have been studied during the past decade in relation to career indecision. Results of the research on career indecision have established relationships with personality variables including, but not limited to: locus of control, anxiety, depression, stress, self-concept, self-esteem, career maturity, and vocational identity. In addition, the research on career indecision during the past decade has identified different subtypes and levels of career indecision, depending on the individual's level of maturity, personal identity, and career information. Indecision and indecisiveness were found on a continuum and related to personality variables. As a result, better interventions in career and personal counseling have been identified and recommended. (Fuqua & Hartmann, 1983; Arce, 1994)

While research continues to develop on the individual and personality variables in relation to career indecision, a few studies have recognized the importance of the family in the career decision process and the importance of having a social network and support system that may alleviate the stress that

college-age students experience when leaving home; being alone, adapting to new ways and styles of life, and having to make career decisions. Still, there is a need to integrate the individual's personal development and social context in making adequate career choices. (Barkin, 1985; Arbona, 1990)

Social support has been studied in relation to stress during difficult situations. Social support seems to provide the positive effect of a sense of stability and recognition of self-worth. Therefore, the individual experiences positive outcomes that will increase the probability of having a healthier psychological and physical life. The development of social support starts when the individual is conceived. As life develops, the child's support system begins to extend from the mother to other family members, friends, teachers, peers, and finally members of a community. Most people perceive their social network as a major source of help from which they hope to gain comfort, reassurance, and advice. Social support implies being accepted and loved for one's self. According to Cobb (1976) there are three main classes of information that the individual has to experience from his/her network: information that he/she is cared for and loved, information that he/she is esteemed and valued, and information that he/she belongs to a communication network. Overall, social support has a buffering effect on stress, and at difficult times helps to prevent the lowering of self-esteem, by maintaining psychological well-being (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

Neeman and Harter (1986a) studied and compared the

contributions of social support with domain judgments (creativity, intellectual ability, scholastic, athletic, and job competence, appearance, romantic relationship, social acceptance, close relationships, parents, humor, and morality) and successes to one's pretensions (importance ratings) as determinants of global self-worth in children. Peers and adults (classmates, close friends, parents and teachers) were the two primary types of significant others identified. Later on, these researchers were interested in studying college students' self-perceptions. They found a significant relationship between self-worth/self-esteem and social support, i.e. the stronger the social network, the higher the level of self-worth. Neeman and Harter (1986a) defined social support as the degree to which an individual feels significant others acknowledge worthiness. In the case of undergraduate students, these researchers identified as significant others their parents, peers, teachers, and people in campus organizations.

In addition, career development theorists have suggested that self-constructs such as self-concept and its affective component, self-esteem, seem to play a central role in the understanding of career indecisiveness. Kohut (1975), with the theoretical approach of self psychology, identified and explained the role played by self-esteem in the prediction of career indecisiveness. According to Kohut (1975), the individual develops a self-system that serves as the initial center of the personality. Within this self-system the child develops and uses

the parent(s) as a mirror of his or her sense of importance, which will provide him an outlet for self-expression. In addition, Coopersmith (1967; 1984) emphasized that a child is not born with concerns of being good or bad, lovable or unlovable. Children develop these ideas by forming self-images or pictures of themselves based on how they are treated by the significant people, parents, teachers, and peers in their lives. Self-image is the content of a person's perceptions and opinions about him- or herself. The positive or negative attitudes and values by which a person views the self-image, and the evaluations or judgments he or she makes will contribute in the formation of the person's self-esteem. Therefore, self-esteem is a set of attitudes and beliefs that a person brings with him or herself when facing the world. Self-esteem is defined as a personal judgment of worthiness expressed in the attitudes a person holds toward the self. The individual with high self-esteem considers himself a person of worth, and this belief is associated with personal satisfaction and effective functioning. Low self-esteem implies self-rejection, self-dissatisfaction, or self-contempt. Self-esteem provides a mental set that prepares the person to respond according to expectations of success, acceptance, and personal strength. It is an integral part of our performance in different areas of life. Over time, mild frustrations and accurate feedback by parents or significant others will help the individual to develop a realistic sense of worth and ambition. Coherent and stable goals, and evidence of consolidation in the

idealizing self are necessary to form plans for career choice. Otherwise, a lack of consolidation in the idealizing sector of the self may result in career indecision, low self-esteem, and poor formulation of interests (Coopersmith, 1967; 1984; Robbins, 1987; Rosenberg, 1986).

In addition, an increasing population of cross-cultural and multicultural individuals are seeking higher education. Investigators like Fouad (1994) and Arbona & Novy (1991) have found that cultural values and specific characteristics of certain populations (Hispanics and Latinos) are deeply rooted in their social and cultural traditions. Therefore, the research on career indecision with these populations may help understand the career-decision making process of these specific groups.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate how social support and self-esteem may influence undecided college students from two cross-cultural groups when making a career decision. Since interrelationships among social support, self-esteem, and career indecision have not received much attention, the present study investigated whether students with low social support and low self-esteem were characterized by a high level of career indecision. Furthermore, relationships among the demographic variables (gender, age, and year of study) and the variables of career indecision, social support, and self-esteem were examined. Finally, a comparison between the two cross-cultural groups and the variables of social support, self-esteem, and career indecision were analyzed.

METHODOLOGY

1. The Setting:

The settings for this study were the University of Pittsburgh Counseling and Student Development Center (Pitt) and the Counseling Center from the Universidad del Pacifico, Lima-Peru (Peru). This University offers fewer career majors than the University of Pittsburgh.

2. Participants:

Participants were 140 undergraduate students, between 16 and 25 years old. All of them asked for career counseling during their Spring Semesters of 1995 and their participation was optional. Sixty two were male (44%), and 78 were female (56%). Sixty nine students were from the Pitt group, 26 were males and 43 were females. Most students in this group were Freshman (42%), followed by Sophomores (39%), Juniors (7%) and Seniors (12%). Seventy one students were part of the Peru sample. Males comprised 51% (n=36) of this group, females were 49% (n=35). From a five-year program, in this group, most students were from the Second Year (32%), followed by First Year (25%), Third Year (18%), Fourth Year (17%) and Fifth Year (7%) students. Table 1 shows these demographics. The information was gathered while students were in the Counseling Centers.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Subjects

Variable	Group Pitt	Peru	Combined
1. Gender			
Males	26 (38%)	36 (51%)	62 (44%)
Females	43 (62%)	35 (49%)	78 (56%)
n	69	71	140
2. Age			
Mean	19.45	19.37	19.41
SD	1.61	1.61	1.60
Range	18-25	16-24	16-25
3. Year of Study			
Freshman/First	29 (42%)	18 (25%)	47 (34%)
Sophomore/Second	27 (39%)	23 (32%)	50 (36%)
Junior/Third	5 (7%)	13 (18%)	18 (13%)
Senior/Fourth	8 (12%)	12 (17%)	20 (14%)
/Fifth		5 (7%)	5 (4%)

3. Instruments:

Demographic variables such as age, gender, and year of study were addressed by a demographic questionnaire. The three variables, career indecision, self-esteem and social support were assessed by the Career Decision Scale (CDS) developed by Osipow, Carney, Winer, Yanico, and Koschier (1987); the Self-Esteem Inventory-Adult Form (SEI), designed by Coopersmith (1984); and the Social Support Scale (SSS) constructed specially for college students by Neeman and Harter (1986). A packet containing the instruments was provided to those students interested in

participating in the study.

For this study, all three instruments were appropriately translated from English to Spanish and item-item reliability tests were performed to evaluate the internal consistency of each of the instruments for each cross-cultural group. Results reported an alpha coefficient of .61 for the University of Pittsburgh, and .86 for the Universidad del Pacifico. Additionally, an item-total reliability test was performed to evaluate the internal consistency of the Social Support Scale for each cultural sample. The alpha coefficient for the group from the University of Pittsburgh (Pitt) was .86, and for the Universidad del Pacifico (Peru) was .81. Finally, an item-item reliability test was performed to evaluate the internal consistency of the Self-Esteem Inventory-Adult Form for each cultural samples. The alpha coefficient for the University of Pittsburgh was .86, and for the Universidad del Pacifico was .81.

RESULTS

Once the data were gathered, statistical analyses were performed. Means and standard deviations of both groups, Pitt and Peru, are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations and Ranges: Career Indecision Scale, Social Support Scale and Self-Esteem Inventory Scores

Variable	Group	n	M	SD	Range
1. Indecision*	Pitt	69	39.20	5.77	23-54
	Peru	71	35.73	8.61	20-54
	Combined	140	.44	7.52	20-54
2. Social Support**	Pitt	68	62.41	8.89	29-75
	Peru	71	60.28	9.52	39-80
	Combined	139	61.32	9.25	29-80
3. Self-Esteem***	Pitt	69	63.10	19.60	20-98
	Peru	71	66.31	17.10	32-96
	Combined	140	64.73	18.38	20-98

* **Scores over 34 points reveal undecidedness.**
** **Scores under 65 points reveal low social support.**
*** **Scores under 65 points reveal low self-esteem.**

Pearson-Product Moment Coefficients were used to determine correlations among the two independent variables, social support and self-esteem, and the dependent variable, career indecision. A positive correlation was found between social support and self-esteem ($r=.598$, $p<.001$). Negative correlations were found between social support and career indecision ($r=-.291$, $p<.001$) and between self-esteem and career indecision ($r=-.302$, $p<.001$). No significant correlations were found among the demographic variables of age, gender, and year of study and the variables of career indecision, social support and self-esteem. Results are shown in Table 3.

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Table 3

Correlations Between Demographic Variables and Social Support, Self-Esteem and Career Indecision Scales for Pitt and Peru (n=140)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.Age	--					
2.Year	.751***	--				
3.Gender	-.313***	-.281***	--			
4.Support	-.063	-.055	.102	--		
5.Esteem	-.051	-.012	-.035	.598***	--	
6.Indecision	-.031	-.083	-.011	-.291***	-.302***	--

***p < .001

Multiple regression analyses were performed in order to predict how much influence the variables of self-esteem and social support had on career indecision. Two analyses were performed, one for the combined group, and then, one for each of the two groups, Pitt and Peru. Results for the combined group, as shown in Table 4, demonstrated that only 11% of the variance was predicted by the independent variables of social support and self-esteem on career indecision ($F=8.27$, $p<.001$).

Table 4

Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Career Indecision from Social Support and Self-Esteem for the Combined Group (N = 140)

Independent Variables	B	SE B	β	T	Sig T
Self-Esteem	-.079	.042	-.192	-1.90	.060
Social Support	-.144	.082	-.176	-1.75	.083

R^2 = .108
F = 8.27, p < .0004

Each group was then analyzed separately. For Pitt, no significance was found. Only 1% of the variance was reported as influencing indecision. However, for Peru, 29% of the variance explained how social support and self-esteem influenced career indecision ($F=13.96$, $p<.001$). These results are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5

Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Career Indecision From Social Support and Self-Esteem for Peru (n = 71)

Independent Variables	B	SE B	β	T	Sig T
Self-Esteem	-.118	.062	-.234	-1.900	.062
Social Support	-.337	.111	-.373	-3.036	.003

R^2 = .291
F = 13.96, p < .0001

In addition, t-tests were performed to establish differences among the variables and between each of the groups. Findings reported a significant difference in the career indecision responses between Pitt and Peru ($t=-2.80$, $p<.001$), as shown in Table 6. A higher level of indecision was found for Pitt ($M=39.20$) when compared to Peru ($M=35.73$).

Table 6

Comparison of Levels of Career Indecision Between Pitt and Peru

Group	n	M	SD	df	t-value	2-tail Prob.
Pitt	69	39.20	5.77	138	-2.81	.006
Peru	71	35.73	8.61			

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For the social support variable, results showed no significant differences between the two groups (t=-1.36, ns); nevertheless the mean from Pitt (M=62.41) was higher than the mean from Peru (M=60.28). Finally, the self-esteem variable found no significant differences between the two cross-cultural groups (t=1.03, ns); the mean from Pitt (M=63.10) was lower than the mean from Peru (M=66.31) indicating a higher level for Peru.

DISCUSSION

Findings in the study suggest that there are significant correlations between the variables of social support, self-esteem and career indecision for the two groups. Other researchers, such as Barkin (1995), Kelton-Brand (1995), and Lafont (1986) have found similar correlations in their studies on social support and self-esteem. Similarly, Harris (1983), Fouad (1994, and Luzzo (1994) have reported in their research with college students, higher correlations between the variables of social support and career indecision.

Results provide with additional information, social support and self-esteem are not significantly different when comparing the two groups, however, the career indecision was found to be different between the two groups of undergraduate students. This suggests that there might be other cultural and educational characteristics influencing the students' career choice. It seems

that the American Educational system (a four-year college degree with a variety of majors to choose), as opposed to the Peruvian system (a five-year program with a limited selection of career choices) might be taken into consideration when explaining the career choices of their students (Consejo de Admision, 1995).

The present study analyzed, for the first time, the variables of social support and self-esteem in relation to career indecision on college students from two cross-cultural groups. Results of the relationship of these two variables and career indecision may be answering questions about indecision differently for each cross-cultural group. They may provide a new perspective to integrate the research of career indecision. Furthermore, this provides the counselor with additional information that may be useful when counseling college undecided students. undecided about career, from diverse cultural backgrounds.

In addition, high reliability coefficients were found for the three instruments, the Career Decision Scale, the Social Support Scale, and the Self-esteem Inventory, when assessing each cross-cultural group with their English and the Spanish versions. Therefore, these instruments were judged satisfactory from a reliability point of view for the assessment of social support, self-esteem and career indecision in these groups of undergraduate students.

According to the demographic characteristics of the sample (age, gender, and year of study), both cross-cultural groups of

career undecided college students were found similar to participants in other studies on career indecision. No differences were found among the demographic variables of age, gender, and year of study in relation to the variables of career indecision, social support and self-esteem for both cross-cultural groups. Studies done by Larson et al. (1988), Robbins (1987) and Whittaker (1994) reported similar results.

Finally, this study may be offering additional possibilities to increase the validity of the three instruments: the Social Support Scale, the Self-Esteem Inventory-Adult Form, and the Career Decision Scale in English and in Spanish. Finally, by comparing the two cross-cultural groups of undergraduate students, new perspectives may be integrated in the research of career indecision for better understanding and counseling college undecided students from a diverse cultural background.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Several conclusions can be drawn from the present study. In terms of relationships among the variables, a positive correlation was found between the variables of social support and self-esteem for the two cross-cultural groups. These results support theories that strong social support aids in the development of a higher level of self-esteem.

Interestingly, when analyzing the variables of social

support and self-esteem as predictors of career indecision, results were different for each cross-cultural group. For Pitt participants, no significance was found. For Peru participants, 29% of the indecision variance could be attributed to social support and self-esteem. Finally, when comparing both groups on each variable, the data suggest that the cross-cultural groups were similar when comparing social support and self-esteem, but revealed differences regarding career indecision. Both groups were highly undecided. However, the Pitt sample showed more indecision than the group from Peru. Perhaps the lack of career choices available in the Peruvian traditional educational system, as well as cultural characteristics for selecting specific professional degrees may be related to the career decision making of students from Peru. In addition, the internal reliability coefficients obtained for each cross-cultural group demonstrated a significant difference, suggesting that researchers should pay attention when undecided college students from different cultural backgrounds respond to similar questionnaires.

The results of this study have implications for assessing and assisting career undecided students from different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, several recommendations may be important for future research and practice on career indecision.

This study has been limited to only two cross-cultural groups of undecided college students with specific social and educational characteristics. Therefore, it may be useful to conduct additional research with other groups of cross-cultural,

undecided college students in order to develop a deeper understanding of the ethnic, cultural, and social characteristics which influence specific differences and similarities regarding career indecision.

Future studies ought to be concerned with sampling procedures. It would be useful to select samples of cross-cultural undecided undergraduate students with similar educational characteristics where a variety of majors are offered when choosing a career (e.g., the group from Peru has few professional degrees from which to choose career majors).

The use of the Career Decision Scale, the Social Support Scale, and the Self-esteem Inventory in longitudinal research may be recommended for investigating future differences and/or similarities among cross-cultural groups of undecided students. However, it would be interesting to use a different instrument for assessing social support, where extended family members and friends may be included as part of their support network.

Future research may clarify some of the relationships and lack of relationships found in the present study. In the meantime, however, it seems reasonable to advise counselors to be aware that students who ask for career help may have specific and different cultural and educational backgrounds that should be taken into consideration when helping undecided college student clients.

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